

George Orwell's six questions: six rules

All policy advice papers are easier to read when well written. In this masterclass, we give some simple hints from a master of great writing.



George Orwell (real name Eric Blair) was an old Etonian who worked first in the colonial police. In the 20s, 30s and 40s, he was a travel writer (*Down and Out in Paris and London*), a novelist (*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*), an essayist and journalist (*My Country Right or Left*) and finally became a fabulist (*Animal Farm*) and science fiction author (1984).

Through all this, he was dedicated to good writing. And his essay "*Politics and the English Language*", published in *Horizon* in April 1946,¹ forensically examined five passages.

"[They] have not been picked out because they are especially bad [...] – but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer."

Based on his investigation – still worth a read – he came up with two pieces of advice.

First:

"A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:

- 1 What am I trying to say?
- 2 What words will express it?
- 3 What image or idiom will make it clearer?
- 4 Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more:

- 5 Could I put it more shortly?
- 6 Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

And second:

"[...] one can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases:

- 1 Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- 2 Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3 If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- 4 Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6 Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

¹ See, for instance, [https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-](https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/)

[foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/](https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/)

Local Government advice MASTERCLASS

This paper was written by NZIER, November 2025. For further information, please contact anyone from our policy advice team:

Cathy Scott at cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz

Todd Krieble at todd.krieble@nzier.org.nz

John Yeabsley at john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz

NZIER | (04) 472 1880 | econ@nzier.org.nz

Masterclasses from previous years are available via our website <https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/local-government>

While NZIER will use all reasonable endeavours in undertaking contract research and producing reports to ensure the information is as accurate as practicable, the Institute, its contributors, employees, and Board shall not be liable (whether in contract, tort (including negligence), equity or on any other basis) for any loss or damage sustained by any person relying on such work whatever the cause of such loss or damage.